

# Nationwide Boycott of Movie 'Tropic Thunder' in the Works



A coalition of disabilities groups from all over the United States are calling for a national boycott of the film “**Tropic Thunder**” because of what the groups consider the movie’s open ridicule of people with disabilities.

The film, a movie-industry spoof directed by Ben Stiller, was released on Wednesday by Paramount Pictures and its DreamWorks unit.

“Not only might it happen, it will happen,” Timothy P. Shriver, chairman of the Special Olympics, said of the expected push for a boycott. Speaking by phone, Mr. Shriver said he planned to be in Los Angeles with representatives of his group and others to picket the movie’s premiere on Monday evening in this city’s Westwood district.

A particular sore point has been the film’s repeated use of the term “*retard*” in referring to a character, Simple Jack, who is played by Mr. Stiller in a subplot about an actor who chases an Oscar by portraying a mindless dolt.

Mr. Shriver said that he had also begun to ask members of Congress for a resolution condemning what he called the movie’s “hate speech” and calling for stronger federal support of the intellectually disabled.

“The most disappointing thing, the most incredible thing, is that nobody caught it,” said Mr. Shriver, who, as a co-producer of the DreamWorks film “Amistad,” is no stranger to the studio. He spoke of what he described as the studio’s and the filmmakers’ blatant disregard for the disabled even as they stepped carefully around other potentially offensive references, notably in a story line that has Robert Downey Jr. playing a white actor who changes his skin color to play a black soldier.

In a statement on Sunday, Chip Sullivan, a DreamWorks spokesman, said the movie was “an R-rated comedy that satirizes Hollywood and its excesses and makes its point by featuring inappropriate and over-the-top characters in ridiculous situations.” Mr. Sullivan, in the statement, added that the film was not meant to disparage or harm people with disabilities and that DreamWorks expected to work closely with disability groups in the future. But, he said, “No changes or cuts to the film will be made.”

Formal complaints about the content of films are not uncommon, but well-coordinated boycotts are fairly rare. The groups involved said that they represented millions of members and associates.

Perhaps the most striking use of the tactic involved “The Last Temptation of Christ,” released in 1988. Religious groups that considered that movie’s depiction of Jesus blasphemous called for a boycott of companies owned by MCA, whose Universal unit made the film.

DreamWorks and Paramount have shown “Tropic Thunder” in more than 250 promotional screenings around the country since April, but significant complaints came only recently, when marketing materials for the movie caught the attention of advocates for the disabled. The tag line on one mock promotional poster on a Web site, since removed, read, “Once upon a time there was a retard.”

Over the weekend an ad-hoc coalition of more than a dozen disabilities groups including the Arc of the United States, the National Down Syndrome Congress, the American Association of People with Disabilities and others laid the groundwork for public protests that began on Monday. Representatives of the National Down Syndrome Congress saw the movie on Friday and immediately advised advocates to expect a film sufficiently offensive to justify mass action.

“I came out feeling like I had been assaulted,” said David C. Tolleson, executive director of the Down syndrome group who saw the movie. Mr. Tolleson and Peter V. Berns, executive director of the Arc of the US, said on Sunday that they could not recall a similar coalition of disabilities groups forming against a film. Mr. Berns noted that some people had objected to the use of the word “retarded” in “Napoleon Dynamite,” a comedy released by Fox Searchlight and Paramount’s MTV Films unit in 2004. “But there’s really been nothing near this magnitude,” Mr. Berns said.

In interviews with The New York Times, Mr. Stiller and Stacey Snider, chief executive of the DreamWorks unit, said the movie’s humor was aimed not at the disabled but at the foolishness of actors who will go to any length in advancing their careers. After meetings and calls with Ms. Snider and others, the studio altered some television advertising, but declined to edit scenes.

“Tropic Thunder” is likely to be the last movie released by DreamWorks before its top executives, Steven Spielberg, David Geffen and Ms. Snider, formally announce their plans to become aligned with a new company to be financed by Reliance Big Entertainment of India. The three will continue to be involved with at least a dozen films at Paramount but are expected gradually to shift their energies to the new enterprise, which will probably distribute its movies through another studio.

Mr. Shriver said that he had spoken with Ms. Snider and others at DreamWorks about “Tropic Thunder” and came away convinced that they had no plans for mitigating measures.

Their response, he said, convinced him that the time had come for his group and others to strike a far more aggressive public posture on behalf of the disabled. “The movement needs to enter the public eye and not just be talking among ourselves,” he said.

### **Comments on “Nationwide ‘Thunder’ Boycott in the Works”**

1. [August 11th, 2008 at 4:16 pm](#) [Dr. Nora J. Baladerian](#)

I am so disappointed that the Dreamworks team, particularly Spielberg, would support a film that denigrates, demeans and ridicules people who have intellectual disabilities. As he well

knows, and do others, the denigration and later demonization of people with mental illness and intellectual disabilities was one of the initial campaigns of the Nazis, who first exterminated people with disabilities, then gays, and gypsies, before the Jews. It is unfathomable to me that Mr. Spielberg supported this film, and is not now pulling it from distribution. I sincerely hope that Dreamworks will put it at least as much money as this film grosses, and as it cost to make it, in righting the wrongs of this production. Crimes against individuals with disabilities, because of prejudice and hate based upon fodder such as this, is something I have been working against all of my 38 years of work. And now this. Yet another abrogation of our supposed values (I guess I WAS wrong about Americans valuing all of its citizens). where does it end? And, if the Dreamworks team removes this film from distribution and creates a film that enhances the image and valuing of people with disabilities, using at least the same budget or more...then we'll see where they're values lie.

2. [August 12th, 2008 at 2:46 pm](#) Robin Keehn

I ask people who use the word "retard" in my presence... if it would OK with them if I substituted the word "nigger" instead.

All of them...each and everyone... are horrified and say "NO!"

That the word "retard" is in fact the "N" word for many wonderful valued citizens is something that "normal" people in society do not understand...yet.

3. [August 12th, 2008 at 4:51 pm](#) Lourdes Pollock, MA, CCHT

I am appalled that Dreamworks and Steven Spielberg, whom I previously thought were responsible for producing high level, enlightening and positive films, would stoop to such ignorance, hatred and stupidity. Unfortunately, the power they hold to effect the views of the world on any given topic are much too high for them to create such garbage for mass consumption without negative repercussions. Who turned off the lights?

4. [August 13th, 2008 at 8:10 pm](#) Helen Stone

I will never attend any other Spielberg or Stiller production again. nor will my family. Unfortunately they are both so rich what do they care perhaps their grand children will be disabled then maybe they will grow a heart. with much disgust a mother of an autistic son and proud of him! Go to hell!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

This information was compiled by MHRH staff Sue Babin.